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Issue Brief: Native Americans with Disabilities

Key Words:

Native Americans, disabilities, Marinesco-Sjogren syndrome (MSS), alcohol, mental illness, poverty

Description:

This brief discusses health problems among Native Americans in the United States. It will focus on the physical and mental disabilities that are specifically seen among the Native American population.

Key Points:

- The percentage of Native Americans with disabilities is higher than any other racial group in the US.
- There are disabilities specifically found among Native Americans, such as MSS, alcohol-related injuries, and mental disorders caused by extreme poverty.
- Indian Health Service (IHS) and a number of agencies offer health care for Native Americans, but whether they are treated in a culturally adequate way is questionable.

Brief:

Over 4 million Native Americans live in the United States today and its diverse population spreads all across the country. In spite of their rich culture and history, they have less opportunity in education, economics and politics. However, these are not the only issue that Native Americans face. The rate of disabilities among Native Americans is higher than any other racial group in the United States. According to *Americans with Disabilities* (1993), 21.9 percent of Native Americans have disabilities while 9.9 percent for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, 15.3 percent for Hispanics, 19.7 percent for Euro-Americans, and 20 percent for African Americans (qtd. in Keltner et al. 57).

The notion of “disability” varies among Native Americans since the diverse population is not culturally homogenized. But one commonality between them when defining the term “disability” is that physical disabilities are much more recognized than mental disabilities. For example, the majority of Native Americans in Southeastern American Indian Tribe answered on a survey that disabilities are things that prevent one from working, or engaging in sports or other *physical* activities (Keltner et al., 65). And “[l]ess than a fifth (of the total participant of the survey)...mentioned mental health problems or mental retardation as a part of their definition of disability” (Keltner et al., 62).

The most common disability in Native American communities is Marinesco-Sjogren syndrome (MSS) which is caused by intermarriage. MSS is a genetic disorder and people who are diagnosed with the disease suffer from cataracts, short stature, progressive muscular weakness and mental retardation (Keltner et al., 59). Because many Native American communities are isolated as tribes and they fear outsiders, they intermarry and often have children diagnosed with MSS.

Also, permanent injuries caused by alcohol-related car accidents are serious issues for Native Americans. The accidents often result in orthopedic and/or brain injuries, and are 4.4 times higher than the general population (Pichette et al., 39). The excessive consumption of alcohol by Native Americans dates back to the colonial period, when European settlers exchanged alcohol with them in order to get lands and other resources from Native Americans (Teret and Michaels, 248). The alcohol industry still targets Native Americans today and the excessive alcohol consumption by Native Americans persists (Teret and Michaels, 246). It is possible to say that their alcoholism is related to certain types of occupations they have, such as operating casinos, since alcohol can be consumed excessively in such environments.

In addition to these health problems, the rate of other types of disabilities is higher among Native American population than other racial groups. The research conducted by Northern Arizona University and University of Arizona found that Native Americans “experience visual impairments three times more frequently and hearing losses four times more frequently than the general population” (qtd. in Pichette et al. 38). Moreover, 11 percent of Native American children are mentally retarded (Keltner et al., 57).

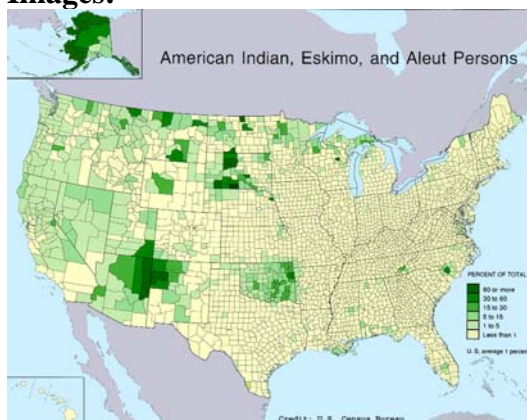
The causes of these disabilities are both congenital and noninheritable as the examples have shown above, but there is another factor which may be causing Native Americans’ disabilities, especially mental problems. A number of scholars who research Native American culture point out that poverty is causing their mental disabilities (Keltner et al., 57). In 2000, 37 percent of the families on reservations were living in poverty, which is four times higher than the national figure of 9 percent (CQ Researcher, 240).

Although disability is a serious issue for Native Americans, it is questionable if they are getting adequate care. For example, the appropriation for Indian Health Service in 2003 was

\$2,533 per capita, compared to the \$3,803 per capita for federal prisoners (CQ Researcher, 243). Also, cultural difference makes it even harder to treat Native Americans with mental disabilities. Native Americans have different values and perspectives from the majority groups. For example, being able to raise the family chickens are important for them while others think being able to read and write are the crucial abilities for their children (Keltner et al., 68). Thus, treating them only with modern medicine is not enough and spiritual rehabilitations are needed (Marshall and Largo, 760).

Native Americans in the United States often experience specific physical and mental disabilities that are rarely found among other racial groups. Because they have different cultural perception, their disabilities have to be treated in the culturally appropriate way.

Images:



<http://www.city-data.com/forum/general-u-s/679653-amish-across-usa-native-americans-across.html>



<http://www.cdc.gov/Features/dsDisabilityAndHealthStatus/>

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Websites

Indian Health Service (IHS): <http://www.ihs.gov/>

National Council on Disability: <http://www.ncd.gov/>

National Museum of the American Indian: <http://www.nmai.si.edu/>

Native American Disability Resources: http://www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/frc_natv.htm

US Census: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kbr01-15.pdf>